

You don't want to be perfect

Perfect is the last thing you want to be. Take my word for it. Perfect derives from the Latin “perficere,” meaning to bring to an end, to finish. Once you're perfect, you've arrived at the end. You can't move forward because there's nowhere for you to go. To all intents and purposes, you're over and done with.

And yet, to judge by the quantity of books and articles on the subject, perfection seems to be the goal of an increasing number of North Americans. They want to be perfect parents, perfect spouses, get the perfect job, find the perfect house, cook perfect meals, have perfect hair, perfect bodies, perfect make-up, perfect clothes. Only children seem to be safe from this obsession. I haven't heard of any who are concerned about being the perfect offspring.

Right now I am writing a book on Leonardo da Vinci for the non-specialist. Having earned my PhD in Renaissance art history, I had, of course, studied Leonardo da Vinci. But I'd always focused on particular problems in his work. For this book, I've had to become reacquainted with Leonardo, to study his career in its entirety, beginning with the earliest scrap of information we have about him, through to the end.

Why have I suddenly started talking about Leonardo da Vinci, you wonder? Well, he's often described as someone constantly seeking perfection in what he did. I've even heard him called the perfect man. But after taking a closer look at Leonardo's life, I've come to the conclusion that perfect doesn't enter into what he was striving for at all. Leonardo was determined to figure out how things worked, whether it was the human body or a machine or whatever happened to have caught his interest. He never stopped looking, he always asked questions. He wasn't aiming for perfection, he was simply attempting to understand. Failure didn't stop him – it just made him try a different way to reach his goal.

Because our society's mania for perfection was still heavy on my mind, I was especially cheered at one of the projects promoted at a stand at the Sharing Farm's Garlic Festival on August 19th. The name immediately caught my attention – Gratisvore. It's composed of the Latin “gratis,” meaning out of favour or kindness, and the suffix vore, which stems from the Latin “vorare,” to devour, and is found in such English words as

carnivore, herbivore and omnivore. Gratisvore is a food recovery program, whereby fruits and vegetables deemed unsaleable are rescued from stores and donated to food banks and community meals. To demonstrate their aim, the organizers displayed a bunch of oddly-shaped carrots, which, they observed, the grocery store would expell from its wares. Why? Because the grocery store would only want to sell the perfect vegetable – at this point the organizers whipped out a beautiful, unblemished carrot and laid it next to the homely bunch.

Of course, I preferred the homely carrots. Why? I suspected that they would have a better flavour. Why? For the same reason that I believe un-beautiful actors are better than beautiful ones. My current favourites Alun Armstrong, Imelda Staunton and Jim Carter will bear me out. Who needs perfection?

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